

THE ROLE OF RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION IN THE TRANSITION FROM A REGULAR AND CONSCRIPT ARMY TO AN ALL VOLUNTEER FORCE

Lieutenant Colonel Drs. Frans Matser
Head of Selection, Royal Netherlands Army

For a good army one needs three things: the right EQUIPMENT, sufficient TRAINING, and the right number and quality of PERSONNEL. In my address I will tell you something about the recruitment and selection of personnel in the Royal Netherlands Army after the suspension of conscription. I have divided what I am going to say to you in the next 30 minutes into three parts:

First of all, I briefly want to describe the historical development that resulted in conscription in the Netherlands being abolished in 1996 after almost 200 years.

Secondly, I shall be looking at a number of changes that have occurred in the recruitment and selection of regular military personnel.

Thirdly, I shall be pointing out a number of striking differences between the selection procedures required for conscripts and for recruiting regulars.

Most of the matters I shall be talking about will be related to the situation in the Royal Netherlands Army (RNLA). Ninety per cent of what amounted to 40,000 conscripts annually who served in the Dutch armed forces up to 1992 served with the army. The air force and the navy in the Netherlands traditionally only had a very small percentage of conscripts among their ranks.

First the history. I am convinced that the key reason for the abolition of conscription was the fact that conscripts could not be deployed to do much other than defend Dutch territory.

I shall not go too far back in my historical recapitulation, but shall start in the year 1979. In that year, the last major deployment of Dutch conscripts outside the Netherlands took place, namely in the Lebanese conflict. Between 1979 and 1985, the Netherlands committed an armored infantry battalion to the Lebanon at the request of the United Nations. This battalion was intended to act as a peacekeeping force in the buffer zone between Israel and the Lebanon. Altogether, 8,000 military personnel took part in this operation over a six-year period. The majority were conscripts.

Since the relationship between the Netherlands' own interests and the serious decision to deploy conscripts for UN operations had become much more controversial than in previous years, parliament in the Netherlands passed a motion very shortly afterwards, in 1987, to the effect that conscripts could only be assigned outside the Netherlands on a voluntary basis. This "voluntary" stipulation was far-reaching. Conscripts who had said that they were willing to be assigned abroad could actually still refuse during or even after their training. They could even back out right up to the point at which they were stepping into the plane to leave.

Since the RNLA mainly consisted of conscripts, this made it extremely difficult to prepare and assign large combat units. Hence the Netherlands was *de facto* a non-starter when it came to UN operations. After all, a military unit for deployment abroad, in which the majority of the servicemen were at liberty to refuse to go to the "trouble spot", did not make for a very credible force. It was consequently no coincidence that the Dutch government decided in 1990 not to take part in the Gulf War with ground forces.

The debate as to whether or not the Netherlands should participate in future UN operations rapidly became a debate on whether or not to abolish the conscription system. Effective participation in UN operations of any scale was impossible for the Netherlands with a regular and conscript army. This realization rapidly led to the political decision to change legislation on conscription in the Netherlands.

A decision was ultimately made in 1992 that compulsory military service would be abolished at the end of 1996. The question that then arose, of course, was what consequences this would have for the army. A policy vision was desperately needed. In 1993 the Dutch government published a policy document describing how the army, which was made up of 63,000 soldiers (mostly conscripts), could be transformed in four years' time into a smaller, more professional all-volunteer force of around 25,000 soldiers.

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Of course, the need to save money also played a role. Many spoke belittlingly of cashing in the peace dividend, but it was also clear that a large army had no longer grounds for existence without an obvious enemy. So the army had to find a new task and new professional standards.

Such professional standards would require unlimited deployability and a high level of skill. Neither of these could be achieved with conscripts, who at that point in time were only required to serve for nine months and who could not be deployed against their will. What was needed, therefore, was a new, smaller and more professional all-volunteer force.

Now that I have told you something about the historical background of the transition to an all-volunteer force, I should like to concentrate on the required changes. As I have said, I shall primarily confine myself to the changes in the field of recruitment and selection. I will try to shed light on the approach we chose, the problems we encountered, and the solutions we found.

One of the major doubts in this operation from the start was whether the RNLA would succeed in recruiting and selecting the requisite number of regular personnel with the right qualifications. The Netherlands, as a small nation mainly focusing on trade and the service industry, has little military tradition. Nor did the profession of soldier seem to be very popular among Dutch youth. What is more, the fact that many generations of men in the Netherlands had had to do compulsory military service had not brought about a particularly positive image of the army as an employer. People were often heard saying that you only went into the army if you had to.

From 1993 onwards, therefore, there was understandable skepticism as to whether the army would succeed in appointing around 6,000 military personnel annually, without making concessions to the requisite standards. After all, the idea behind the new all-volunteer force was that despite the fact that the number of soldiers was fewer, the combat power and armed readiness would increase. This should happen as a result of more professional training, better equipment, and a more positive attitude.

The importance of this professional training, equipment, and mental attitude cannot be emphasized enough. I should like to quote the words of the American Chief of Staff, General Sullivan, who was confronted with personnel reductions among numerous NATO partners in Europe in 1994 and spoke the following wise words: "Smaller is not better; smaller is smaller -- better is better."

The guiding principle we chose for the changes in the Royal Netherlands Army has consequently always been that "smaller" was inevitable, but that smaller should be "better". I should like to show you the approach we took in three steps, concentrating above all on the role of recruitment and selection as part of the process.

Step one: Improving recruitment and selection system and the provision of information.

Step two: Professionalise the selection process

Step three: (very briefly) Adapting the existing organization.

As I have already mentioned, in 1992 most of the experts thought it was impossible to recruit enough soldiers who would be willing to serve in the new all-volunteer force. The Commission responsible for carrying out a study into the feasibility of an all-volunteer force had actually conducted detailed scientific research into the question. Its conclusion was that there would NOT be sufficient interest. The first thing that the army leaders tackled, therefore, was improving the army's image. A number of measures were taken for this purpose and here also coincidence helped. For one thing, the budget for recruitment and improving the army's image was substantially increased. Despite the fact that cuts were being made universally, a major investment was made in this item. The recruitment budget rose from 7 million dollars in 1991 to 17 million dollars in 1995. This money was not only used for catchy commercials, but also to set up a professional recruitment and selection organization. The aim of the investment was not just to recruit people, but above all to bring out the message that the army was a good employer providing a variety of interesting jobs.

A further step was made in the field of communications. A national chain of military job shops was set up to give every interested applicant the opportunity of thoroughly finding out all about the army as employer, as well as the pros and cons of a possible job as a soldier. In eleven of the larger towns in the Netherlands, such as Amsterdam, Utrecht and Rotterdam, you will find a modern, well-equipped job information centre, right in the centre of the town in a busy shopping street. Here a team of carefully-selected military personnel provides information. They use the most modern communication and briefing techniques, including virtual reality and interactive video. An important ethical aspect here is that we do not want to press-gang people into joining the army; we want to provide sound and objective information. We also talk about the disadvantages of military life,

including deployment in life-threatening situations, being away from home on assignments or exercises for weeks or months, and physically demanding work during training and on the job.

One of the most important factors for success which I should like to tell you a little more about was the term of contracts. Research had indicated that the best length of time for a contract FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE ARMY would be 4 to 6 years. This was a particularly inexpensive solution because it meant that relatively few people had to be specially trained each year.

Research into what YOUNG PEOPLE wanted, however, revealed a completely different picture. It was found that willingness to tie oneself down drastically diminished if one was talking about contracts for much longer than, say, two years. The army leaders then took an expensive, but extremely wise decision, so that in the end the duration of contracts was set at two-and-a-half years: six months spent in training and two years working. In practice this proved a very wise decision.

It now looks as if a great many of the soldiers (between 50 and 70%), once they are in the army, want to remain longer than two-and-a-half years. It would seem, therefore, that as a result the average term of contracts will work out at approximately four years after all.

Naturally, during the initial phase numerous other matters played a role which it would be impossible for me to deal with here. However, I want to make an exception in one case, because coincidence played a major part. Since the seventies, the army had been preoccupied with replacing old uniforms and equipment, which to a large extent still dated from the Second World War. The introduction of the new personal equipment and uniforms approximately coincided with the changeover to an all-volunteer force.

This external symbol, the most striking manifestation of which is the new, American-cut camouflage suit, provided a visible dimension to the transformation of the regular and conscript army into an all-volunteer force. Whereas military personnel frequently used to change in the barracks so that they would not be seen in their old-fashioned uniforms, now you see them everywhere in the Netherlands, waiting at stations and strolling in town in their new camouflage suits, as walking advertisements. And the wearers are clearly proud of them.

Summarising the first step: A combination of a deliberate effort to improve the army's image by an extensive advertising and information campaign, a new uniform (bringing out a professional image) and a strategic choice for short-term contracts, ensured that there were a sufficient number of applicants.

That brings me to step two. This began with critically looking over the selection criteria and the selection and assessment process. The Commander in Chief started by setting up a working party to decide on the necessary criteria for all posts. Dutch conscripts, on average, were highly educated. As a result it had become practice to deploy highly-trained people to do simple jobs. Strictly speaking, this was frequently unnecessary for the work that had to be done, but of course it was very useful special during training. For example, instructors had little difficulty explaining the principles of electricity to electrical engineers. Thus the new criteria could frequently be less demanding than the ones people had been used to. Not that this meant that the standards were lower, because the overqualified conscript was replaced by a much more highly motivated and sufficiently well-trained regular soldier. Naturally, this gave rise to problems, especially among instructors, who had to adapt their manner of teaching and the number of lessons they gave.

Bringing the selection criteria down to realistic proportions also applied to the medical examination. In the past, good eyesight and a certain height were readily set as qualifying criteria for certain posts. Now a realistic approach was taken to these criteria. Why shouldn't a lorry driver wear glasses, when he has excellent sight with them? However, when it came to the essential requirements there was absolutely no watering down of the demands. The idea after all was, and still is, that the new army must be smaller, but that it should also be better. The clear message was that it would be preferable to have a vacancy than to have someone in a post who did not have the necessary qualifications. In fact, the advent of an all-volunteer force also offered the opportunity of actually setting higher criteria in a number of cases. Demands were now made of people's aptitude for sport and their motivation, both of which had been impossible at the time of compulsory military service, as you will understand. For instance all military personnel now have to undergo a sports examination, which could not be done with conscripts. It is also ascertained during selection whether candidates are well-motivated, as well as intelligent and stable enough to take part in a posting abroad.

Are there no drawbacks to filling the new all-volunteer force? Of course there have been start-up problems. The average level of qualifications of the group of soldiers is of course lower than that of conscripts. As a result, the group is more homogenous and requires more guidance and training time. The response to this has been to introduce more practical training methods and additional instructors. Also the Army stimulates the soldiers in all

kind of ways to study. For this purpose they are given time and financial support.

The main yardstick for success in my view is the opinion of the commanders. The first surveys carried out by the Behavioral Sciences Division reveal that the majority of commanders are very satisfied with their new troops. They are notably impressed by their motivation and effort. It may be too early to give a considered opinion, but many officers and NCOs who were originally skeptical now say they are satisfied or sometimes even extremely pleased. One battalion commander wrote to me: "I am proud of my new professional soldiers and I certainly would not want to go back to conscripts".

The second step can be summarised therefore as ensuring that the right criteria and the right method of selection were adopted so that the right people are left over from an adequate number of applicants.

That brings me to the third step. This was perhaps the most difficult. Much needed to change in order to transform a small army into a better army. One of the most painful decisions was to find new jobs outside the army for the few thousand redundant civilian and military personnel. A lot of time and money was put into this, with varying success. In addition, the new army had to become more effective and capable of operating more or less worldwide. This was why hundreds of units were abolished and virtually all the remaining units were radically reorganized.

In addition, an active effort was made to bring about a different 'corporate' climate. This is neither the time nor the place to go into detail on this here. Therefore I shall not say anything more on this subject here.

I shall return, therefore, to the selection organisation and the last part of my address. What now are the major differences between the assessment and selection of conscripts and of regular military personnel? What has fundamentally changed in the selection process?

First of all, of course, are the numbers. Prior to 1992, every year between 120,000 and 140,000 young men were more or less compulsorily examined for military service. The majority of them were assigned to the army. We now expect that the army selection centre will have to assess an annual 15,000 to 18,000 youngsters for their suitability in order to employ 6000 soldiers yearly. Before 1993, only 1500 professional soldiers were needed yearly, most of them officers and NCO's. Completely new is that twenty per cent or so of those that come for a job are women. We managed quite well. Each year more than 90 % of the vacancies were filled.

Not only numbers changed, however. Another major change is the mental attitude of doctors and psychologists. In the era of conscription they were regularly confronted with people who simulated mental and physical disabilities. In cases of doubt, one could readily decide that someone was not suitable because the person in question was seldom dissatisfied with this outcome.

Now the situation is completely different. Every applicant is positively motivated, looking for a job, and doctors and psychologists really do have to look for things that could impede a person's functioning as a soldier. As with every job application, the applicants try to show their best side, sometimes conveniently forgetting a knee operation or repeated brushes with the law. Moreover, a rejection is likely to result in an appeal, so great care is required.

This of course does have a very positive side to it. All of the youngsters who walk into the selection centre these days are positively motivated. This was of course quite different with the conscripts. The new soldiers are keen to be in the army and those that pass the test are consequently proud of it.

Two more changes that have occurred in assessment and selection are the nature and depth of the psychological test and the introduction of a sports examination. I should like to say something about both these aspects.

The psychological test for conscripts was very simple. There was a short interview with a selection officer, lasting ten to fifteen minutes, and a personality test was set. Suitability or motivation was not examined since it was not known for which post or even for which section of the armed forces the person in question was destined.

Now the situation is quite different. The psychological selection for potential army recruits includes both a personality test and an intelligence test. Moreover, each applicant has an in-depth interview lasting up to one hour, during which the past, present, and the future of the applicant are examined in detail. Matters such as motivation, whether the person can be suitably assigned abroad, social circumstances, aptitude for sport, and their ideas about their future training and post, are all dealt with in detail. In the past year 40% of applicants were rejected after the psychological tests.

Like the psychological selection, the medical examination has also undergone also radical changes. The most striking aspect is the introduction of a sports examination. The idea behind this check-up is to ensure that only those people in the best physical condition are appointed to the most demanding posts. This also serves to set a clear lower limit. Anyone who fails to achieve this is rejected.

Ten percent of the young men and 50% of the women applicants are rejected after the sports test. On top of this another 10% (of both sexes) are rejected on medical grounds because of illnesses or disabilities. Altogether, after the selection process only one in three applicants is appointed. This selection is severe, but we have to keep in mind that we want to make things smaller, but better. And because at this moment we manage to attract enough applicants, it works well.

You might ask yourselves how these soldiers perform during training and work. From among the soldiers who start their training only, 10 to 15% drop out during the first months. This is a relatively low figure in comparison to other countries with an all-volunteer force.

That brings me to the end of what I have to say. I hope I have made it clear to you that the key to the successful changeover from a large regular and conscript army to a smaller, more professional all-volunteer force rests to a substantial degree with a professional recruitment and selection organization that is well-equipped for its task. Of course problems and new challenges remain, for in contrast to the Cold War period, the army as an organization is no longer a static entity, but is constantly on the move. In the past three years the Royal Netherlands Army has put a lot of money, time, and effort into making the recruitment and selection organization more professional. I am convinced that this investment will bear fruit in the years ahead.

I wish to recall General Sullivan's remark to the effect that smaller by itself is not better. As I started my address I mentioned that a good army needs three things: the right EQUIPMENT, sufficient TRAINING and the right number and quality of PERSONNEL. So one of the keys to make smaller = better is by recruiting and selecting the right people.

 [Back to Table of Contents](#)

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